

## Revisiting Perceptions of African Images in and Outside the Classroom

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### Abstract

This essay explores how misrepresentation of Africa through stereotypes has engendered negative effects and obscured our understanding of the image of the continent and its inhabitants. It highlights the sources of stereotypes, how they influence consciousness of Africans and the global community. Increasingly, emerging narratives and images shaped by the media have countered jaded stereotypes offering unique perspectives and progressively regulating perceptions about Africa. A variety of sources from books, videos, the Internet, and resourceful people can aid a better understanding of this massive continent.

*Keywords:* Representation, stereotypes, college teaching, Africa, Africans

### Introduction

Africa's relationship to Europe and the United States spans several centuries yet the representation of images of Africa in these regions has over the years tended to denigrate the continent and its people. Colonial narratives and images of the nineteenth and twentieth centu-

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ries represented Africa in an endless list of deficits including the dark continent, uncivilized, poor, and remote that strip the continent of its vast worth and portrayed Africans as barbaric, savage, and subhuman (Harth, 2012; Michira, 2002; Mweninguwe, 2023; Ohaegbulam, 2019). Three decades ago, representations of Africa in popular media were filled with negative stereotypes in the form of narratives and images of poverty, disease, wars, strange people, and dense jungles. These representations projected the continent as monolithic, static and on the brink of disaster influencing collective consciousness of some Africans and non-Africans (Harth, 2012; Keim, 2009). Africa has several issues that must be exposed in specific contexts along with the efforts the people are making to address them. While efforts to deconstruct perceptions of Africa are underway, the emergence of new subtle stereotypes complicates the restoration of a balanced representation of the continent.

Several scholars have traced the genesis of myths and preconceptions of Africa to the era of slavery and colonial rule and examined how stereotypes about Africa plagued earlier epochs (Keim, 2009; Harth, 2012 & Michira, 2002). Negative and positive stereotypes about Africa have been pervasive in print media including books, newspapers, journals, and magazines popular media such as films, art, cartoons, music, television, advertising, social media outlets, tourism, photography, and in everyday conversations on the continent and across the globe. Keim (2009) states, “[M]agazines and documentaries tend to treat African cultures as rural, and static to ignore cities and other connections to the modern world” (p. 64). The Oscar-winning film, *Out of Africa* (1985) directed and produced by Sydney Pollack was adapted from the memoir of Karen Blixen under the pen-name Isak Dinesen, published in 1937. The film recounts her memories about colonial Kenya from 1914 to 1931 and amplifies exoticism of African’s wildlife, landscape, and the inferiority and primitivity of the Africans stripped of historical and cultural contexts. The apparent beautiful landscape and the hierarchical relationship between European characters and indigenous Kenyan characters simultaneously expose and attempt to cover up colonial prejudice.

The damaging effects of both negative and positive stereotypes have been addressed in several sources. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Danger of a Single Story* Ted Talk, in July 2009, underscores the negative influences that a “single story” about Africa, individuals and groups can have. Rooted in simple misunderstandings or one’s lack of knowledge of those close and not so close to us, Adichie exposes that these stories are told in our households, books and on

the television in ways that can cause us to generalize and make assumptions about individuals and groups of people. In *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, Keim demonstrates how American misconceptions about Africa has eclipsed an accurate understanding of the enormously diverse ethnic groups and cultures of Africa. Keim examines the evolution of such stereotypes and exposes the role that popular media, the classroom and individuals have played in their perpetuation.

Over the last ten years, the question, “What is Africa to you?” has elicited numerous responses in my college classrooms ranging from those that view the continent from an idealized lens as “home of kings and queens,” a place with popular safari destinations, and a mineral store house to a plethora of negative images such as poverty, disease, and wars. More recent responses have included wild animals, beautiful topography, diverse ethnic groups, and diverse languages. Limited exposure to sources that contain diverse information on Africa can lead to a fixation on the few images students and non-students have internalized. As Delpit (2006) and Michira (2002) remind us, power dynamics influence not only how other people’s stories are told but also how cultural differences are embraced in and outside the classroom.

Because the teaching of content on Africa is limited in most American high schools, several college students have scarce knowledge of Africa. From the late 1990s to around 2014 *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by the eminent Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, was one of the few books that many American college students were exposed to in high school. The book depicts a complex yet harmonious communal life of the Ibo of modern Nigeria before colonial interference. In varied ways, this book countered historical stereotypes, while not idealizing Africa’s past. In subsequent years, several college students have been unfamiliar with *Things Fall Apart* but have watched recent films such as *Lion King*, *Madagascar*, that project Africa as a wildlife reserve without humans and *Black Panther* and *Queen of Katwe* that have projected alternative positive images. A book and film can offer glimpses of African culture and everyday experiences during a specific historical period but is not enough to familiarize audiences with the specific historical milestones, cultures in the continent’s modern over fifty countries.

While old stereotypes still linger in people’s consciousness and in the minds of those refusing to reimagine Africa positively, exploring and selecting content about Africa today is much easier for those with a keen eye for old stereotypes and new subtle ones. According to Davis (2019) exploring a variety of sources on ancient African history helps to dispel pervasive myths and misconceptions about Africa promoted

by several scholars of the late nineteenth century through much of the twentieth century. Although ancient African history was not flawless, it offers a treasure trove of information on the empires and kingdoms that had rich political organizations, cultures, thriving economic activities, diverse religious groups, and complex knowledge exchanges all of which project a continent that had an impetus for progress. African culture is dynamic, new authors and scholars are updating us on information and new images of Africa.

Increasingly, educators in the United States and elsewhere have become more cognizant of the dangers of our misperceptions of Africa in the twenty-first century. Several educators from African countries are part of generations that have been influenced by European perspectives on Africa, but, through self-awareness and reflection, they have awakened to the realization that representation matters. These educators and their allies of diverse racial backgrounds are committed to representing their race, the African continent, and specific countries in ways that aid in debunking negative stereotypes and offer balanced images of Africa. However, even teachers and individuals from African countries have a limited grasp of knowledge about the continent's over fifty countries. Some teachers from specific African countries have acquired a lot of information on a variety of topics from experience, upbringing, reading, films, videos, and art but encounter blind spots based on tendencies to adopt teaching approaches that are influenced by a particular academic focus, and assumptions. Similarly, teachers have had to read, study and research diverse sources on Africa and other cultures that their training did not cover. When video clips I have selected to supplement course readings reveal a superficial perception of Africa, it becomes imperative to find out more information that expands knowledge.

### **Toward Learning More About Africa**

Africa and the Western world have had centuries of engagement. Educating ourselves about Africa requires exposing historically pervasive negative images on television and newspapers that have tended to reduce the entire continent of Africa and its billion inhabitants to crude stereotypes (Adichie, 2009; Keim, 2009; Ohaegbulam, 2019). A simplistic understanding of a different culture can influence a negative interpretations and relationships. In order to help students conceptualize the scope and depth that studying Africa from a multidisciplinary approach entails, I have used an analogy based on a version of a story titled "The Blind Men and the Elephant" featured on Peace Corps's

website (2024). Rooted in Indian folklore, this story is about a group of blind men who attempt to learn what an elephant is, each touching a different part, and disagreeing on each other's findings. Their collective wisdom leads to the truth and illustrates how different perspectives lead to distinct points of view that singly are incomplete but collectively paint a more comprehensive picture. The analogy is appropriate for explaining the study of the continent of Africa that has been an elephant in the classroom in terms of its massive size, diversity of cultures, languages, religious traditions, talents, and political, social, and economic problems which defy simplification. Whether the focus is on one subject or multiple disciplines, this metaphor encompasses a multitude of ways of knowing that can enhance our critical engagement with the study of Africa, imparts intercultural awareness and deepen public and scholarly knowledge of this diverse continent.

According to Keim (2009), "[T]he most accurate descriptions of Africa take into account its complexity" (p. 190). She further points out that we can grasp a better understanding of Africa through exploring not just the exotic, but also the dynamic and varied experiences in the urban and rural areas and its connections to the global community. "On practically every subject related to Africa there are multiple perspectives, and we can all benefit from learning about and considering the perspectives" (Keim, 2009, p. 191). Exploring diverse perspectives in various disciplines that attempt to subvert the power of traditions of the Western world and non-inclusive voices of African elites can help to amplify marginalized topics and histories and create a refreshing educational experience for students and teachers. Furthermore, a critical examination of how Africans and non-Africans have contributed to Africa's problems would enhance our understanding of the continent's issues.

### **Re-imagining Africa**

In the twenty-first century, several initiatives via social media have opened spaces for the public to access videos of travelers, tourist adventures and content creators that exhibit alternative images some of which demystify western misconceptions of Africa and biases that Africans have perpetuated about themselves. Keim (2009) document that a glut of information on Africa can be gleaned from taking courses on African Studies at various universities some of which provide useful resources on their websites such as Columbia and Stanford universities. Other sources include the Internet, international news outlets such as British Broadcasting Corporation news and local newspapers of specific countries. Additionally, teachers and students can extract

specific information about Africa from carefully selected textbooks, novels, documentaries, museum collections, music, food, films, and other cultural events. Context and caution are key when exploring information about Africa via multiple sources. According to Alola M. & Alola U. (2020) and Ibbi (2018), some Nigerian films have perpetuated stereotypes about women, projecting them to conform to socially constructed gender norms instead of positive images. Whereas films are artistic creations, in the global film market, financial considerations often get priority over image representations. Given that subliminal messages can influence our perceptions, this critique underscores the need for producers and directors to be more creative in producing films that offer a balanced representation of African women.

Efforts to challenge old stereotypes have included promoting positive realistic lives that demonstrate what Africans are doing to rewrite and retell the stories of their continent, through social, digital and print media (Endong 2021; Keim, 2009; Leoudaki, 2017 & Mweningwe, 2023). Endong (2021) states, “[T]he advent and proliferation of the social media in Africa have given Africans the opportunity to create many stories about their continent and challenge or deconstruct the negative stereotypes of Africa on the international scene” (p. 611). For example, the Hashtag “#TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou” movement involving participants from all walks of life emerged in 2015 to combat the negative stereotypes of Africa. Digital users have shared positive images on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Internet blogs of moments of joy, play, celebration, love, creativity, human interaction and aspects of African culture that are rarely shown on mainstream media that foster narrative change (Endong, 2021; Pointer 2023). Pointer (2023) states:

The digital humour and entertainment young Africans generated during COVID-19, when it was thought that Africa would suffer the worst effects of the pandemic, kept both the continent and parts of the western world entertained. Such humour reveals digital agency driving an emerging ‘African’ digital cosmopolitanism. By engaging in subversive content creation, these young digital users generated local and global viral trends and thus challenged the long-held idea that communication and culture flows only one way: from the West to the rest of the world. (p. 156)

In *Everyday Africa’ Project Aims to Undermine Stereotypes*, Leoudaki (2017) displays photographs that capture varied everyday activities of Africans. Also, diverse images of Africa in a selection of impactful films are featured on the Global Citizenship’s website titled “6 Best Depictions of Africa in the Media that Show the Continent’s True

Beauty”. These examples that are shining new positive light on previously marginalized images about Africa and what it means to experience Africa can expand the knowledge of Africans and non-Africans about the continent and foster constructive conversations.

### **Resourceful Community of Educators and Learners**

Campuses can tap into resourceful individuals and groups on the ground, in the community and through collaborative networks. Lisa Delpit’s book *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (2006) is relevant to the teaching of content on Africa. It posits that teachers must be efficacious cultural transmitters in the classroom to reduce the negative effects that prejudice, stereotypes, and assumptions can have on the teaching and learning process. Developing collaborative partnerships with experts in the areas of African Studies including colleagues and guest lecturers, and Study Abroad experiences can advance student learning opportunities. Organizing an educational trip to an African country has the potential to offer opportunities for seeing people go through their daily lives and solving their own problems. These trips have disrupted student’s ingrained notions of specific regions in Africa. For example, an America college student who studied abroad in Cape Town South Africa remarked during an informal meeting that it was too much like America and not the real Africa. Institutional culture that fosters cultural understanding through a variety of events along with faculty awareness and self-reflection of their social position in the classroom and community can support a more informed analysis of teaching content on Africa. The overall impact of these ventures can expose students to varied topics on Africa, intergroup relations, and intercultural communication.

Besides teachers’ expertise, students can be empowered to share their knowledge in the classroom (Delpit, 2006; Swaminathan & Alfred 2001). According to Delpit (2006) educators with a culturally diverse group of students can find valuable insights for addressing culturally instigated miscommunication, which has often perpetuated imbalanced power dynamics in the classroom. For instance, the chapter titled “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children” underscores the missing link that arises from failing to provide opportunities of hearing the full range of voices of minority students and teachers. African students in American colleges come from various countries with diverse personal and social identity markers including ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, age, language, religious affiliation, and national origin. These identities in-

fluence the students' behaviors and beliefs that are constantly shifting and can offer springboards for intercultural reflection and communication. A diverse African student population in a campus classroom, can be valuable resources for knowledge exchange in a safe environment that is intellectually stimulating them to engage in discussions, ask questions, and share opinions and experiences. As Harth (2012) notes understanding African events from the perspective of Africans and those experiencing them can aid in disrupting misrepresentations of Africa.

The prevalence of old and new subtle stereotypes about Africa and Africans requires us to have a critical eye for noticing and interrogating them as well as advocating balanced representation. Resources including books, experts and other media that validate multifaceted perspectives can challenge these ingrained attitudes, avert the danger of telling limited versions of Africa and illuminate narratives and images that are often marginalized.

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